

An Overland Journey from New York to San Francisco in the Summer of 1859 by Horace Greeley (1860)

XXXIV. RAILROAD TO THE PACIFIC.

NEW YORK, Oct. 20, 1859.

I PROPOSE in this letter to present such considerations as seem to me pertinent and feasible, in favor of the speedy construction of a railroad, connecting at some point our eastern network of railways with the waters of the Pacific ocean.

Let facts be submitted to, and pondered by considerate, reflecting men. There are thousands of usually intelligent citizens, who have decided that a Pacific railroad is a humbug—the fantasy of demagogues and visionaries—without having ever given an hour's earnest consideration to the facts in the case. Let me have a patient hearing while I set forth some of the more material of those facts: and first, in answer to the question, *I there a national need of a railroad from the Missouri to the Pacific?* Let us study the records:

The number of passengers arriving at, and departing from San Francisco by water, so far as we have official returns of them, is as follows:

Years.	Arrivals.	Departures.
1849	91,415	No returns.
1850	36,462	No returns.
1851	27,182	No returns.
1852	66,988	22,946
1853	33,232	30,001
1854	47,531	23,508
1855	29,198	22,898
1856	28,119	22,747
1857	22,990	16,902
Total 381,107		139,002

Of course, these were not all from the Atlantic slope, via the Isthmus, or Nicaragua; but the great mass of them were. Probably most of those brought by small vessels from the Pacific ports were not reported to, or recorded at the custom-house at all. There were some immigrants to California, who did not land at San Francisco; though the great mass

undoubtedly did. Then there was a heavy, though capricious overland emigration. Governor Bigler stated the number in 1854 alone at sixty-one thousand four hundred and sixty-two; and there was a very large migration across the Plains in 1852. In 1857, the number was estimated at twelve thousand five hundred. This year, my estimate of the number, founded on personal observation, is thirty thousand; but others make it forty thousand to sixty thousand. There was, also, a very considerable emigrant movement across the Plains in an easterly direction. So far, I have taken no account of the emigration to, and travel from Oregon and Washington. I know I am within bounds in estimating the number who have passed from the Atlantic slope to California and Oregon or Washington at an average of fifty thousand, while the average number who have annually returned thence cannot have fallen below thirty thousand.

Can there be any doubt that nine-tenths of these would have traveled by railroad, had such a road stretched from the Missouri or Mississippi to the Pacific, the fare being moderate, and the passage made within ten days? I estimate that twice to thrice the number who actually did go to California would have gone, had there been such a means of conveyance, and that the present Anglo-American population of the Pacific slope would have been little less than two millions—say California, one million five hundred thousand; Oregon, three hundred thousand; Washington, one hundred thousand; Sonora and Mexican California, one hundred thousand.

Now as to the gold crop of California: The custom-house returns of San Francisco show the following shipments of gold from that city.

Year.	Amount.
1849	\$4,921,250
1850	27,676,346
1851	42,582,695
1852	46,586,134
1853	57,331,024
1854	51,328,653
1855	43,080,211
1856	48,887,543
1857	\$48,592,743

The returns for the last two years, and the first three quarters of the present are not before me; but they are known to have varied little from the rate of fifty millions of dollars per annum, making the total amount entered at the custom-house of San Francisco, as shipped at that port up to this date, rather over five hundred millions of dollars. How many more millions have been brought away in the trunks or belts of returning emigrants, or mercantile passengers, I will not attempt to guess; but the amount is certainly large. On my recent trip homeward, one of the steerage passengers was currently reported as having thirty thousand dollars in gold in his carpet-bag, which he kept in his hands or under his head; others were said to have their thousands each, to a very large aggregate amount. Manifestly, the export of gold from California, the current produce of her mines, has

exceeded fifty millions of dollars per annum, while a considerable amount is retained in the country.

Now all this gold is sent away to pay for goods—many of them very costly in proportion to their bulk and weight—silks and other dear textile fabrics; jewelry; rare wines; expensive wares; drugs, spices, etc. Experience has amply proved that all such products take the quickest rather than the cheapest route. I believe that twenty million dollars of costly or perishable merchandise would annually seek California overland if there were a continuous line of railway from the Atlantic to the Pacific seaboard; and that this amount would steadily and rapidly increase. When the Erie Railroad earns over three million dollars per annum by freight, it certainly must be moderate to hope that ten million dollars would be paid as freight on all the merchandise sent from this side to the Pacific by railroad, and that the larger share of this freight must be earned by and paid to the Pacific road.

Now let us see how far the government would necessarily patronize such a road:

The Post-Office Department is now paying at least one million and a quarter for the conveyance of mails between the Atlantic and Gulf states and California, and was recently paying one million and a half. For this, it gets a semi-monthly mail by way of the Isthmus (six thousand miles, or more than double the distance direct), and a semi-weekly mail by the Butterfield route (also very circuitous), which carries letters only. There are two or three slow mails on other routes, but they cannot be said to add anything of moment to the facilities enjoyed by California and the older states for the interchange of messages or ideas.

As to military transportation, I cannot say what is its amount, nor how far a single line of railway could reduce its proper cost. I believe, however, that the government is now paying at least six millions of dollars for the transportation of men, munitions and provisions to our various military posts between Kansas proper and California, and that fully half of this would necessarily be saved and earned by a railroad to the Pacific.

Utah is now receiving accessions of population (mainly from Europe) over the Plains, though very much of their household stuff has to be sacrificed to the exigencies of the long, hard, tedious journey in wagons drawn by weary, thirsty, famishing cattle. Her people generally live poorly, yet they have to eat and drink, while most of them like to smoke or chew also. At present, most of them abstain from the use of tea, coffee, etc., because these are very dear while the Saints are mostly poor. If there were a good railroad through Utah from Missouri to California, I believe the Saints would patronize it to the amount of at least half a million per annum, and that this amount would rapidly grow to one million. It would of course not stop there. The Rocky Mountain gold mines are no longer a matter of speculation. They just as surely exist as we live; and I believe they are destined to increase in importance and productiveness. I advise no man to dig gold or start for "Pike's Peak." I presume ten of those who go thither will come back ragged and penniless, for every one that they make rich. I expect to hear many times yet that the Kansas gold mines are a humbug—that they have exploded—that every one has left or is leaving them, etc., etc.—and I expect further to hear of new discoveries in this direction or in that, and to record the receipts of millions thence in each of the years from

1861 to 1871 inclusive. Meantime, those who prospect or mine there must live—a point to which eating is rather essential in that keen mountain air. Everything that can be eaten or drank is selling in the Kansas mines at far more than California prices. A railroad from the Missouri to the heads of the Platte or Arkansas would reduce, in those mines, the average cost of food at least half, and would thereby diminish sensibly the cost, and increase the profit of digging gold. If one hundred thousand persons can manage to live in the Rocky Mountain gold region as it stands, three hundred thousand could do better there with a railroad up from the Missouri. And that number, if located there, could not supply less than three million dollars per annum of travel and transportation to a Pacific railroad.

Let us sum up, now, and see what elements of support for such a railroad may be presumed to already exist:

I. Fifty thousand passengers from the Missouri to California and thirty thousand the other way, half first-class at \$100, and the residue, second-class at \$50 each: Total passage-money	6,000,000
II. Fifty millions of gold brought from California, now paying 1 1/4 per cent. freight and insurance, if charged 1 per cent. for conveyance over the railroad would pay	500,000
III. Freight on merchandise sent overland to California, say \$20,000,000 worth, paying at least \$5,000,000 freight, of which the Pacific Road could not receive less than	3,000,000
IV. Conveyance of troops, with freight on arms, munitions, and provisions forwarded to the various military posts between the Missouri and California	3,000,000
V. Conveyance of a daily mail each way in ten days between the Missouri and California, at least	1,000,000
VI. Freight and passage for the Mormons	500,000
VII. Ditto for the Kansas and Rocky Mountain gold region	3,000,000
Total yearly earnings of the Road	\$17,000,000

In this statement, I have made no account whatever of India, China, Australia, Polynesia, etc., as taking this road in their way to and from either shore of the Atlantic. I do not doubt that they would make some use of it as first, and more and more annually thereafter; but this is not a resource to be relied on. I count on no transportation of aught but passengers and gold from California eastward; though I am sure that much grain would flow thence into the *placers* and settlements of the Great Basin, especially the rich mines newly discovered in Carson Valley. I know that California would soon begin to send wines, fruits, etc., eastward, and that her wool, hides, etc., would soon follow in

their path. I can have no doubt that a railroad from the Missouri to the Pacific would earn seventeen millions of dollars the year after its completion, and that its income would increase thenceforth at the rate of at least one million per annum for ten or fifteen years.

Let us now consider the political or national necessity and use for a railroad from the Missouri to the Pacific:

1. The Federal government is now paying some twenty-five millions per annum for military service, mainly west of the Mississippi. Nearly half of this heavy sum is paid for transportation in its various shapes—for the conveyance of provisions, munitions, etc., to the army in Utah, and to the various posts scattered through the Indian country; for horses, mules, and wagons, required to facilitate the conveyance of soldiers, arms, munitions, and baggage from post to post, etc., etc. Every regiment employed in the Indian country, or on the Pacific, costs the treasury at least one thousand dollars per man per annum, of which I estimate that nearly half would be saved by a Pacific railroad. Certainly, the saving from this source could not fall short of five millions per annum.

2. But the efficacy, the power of an armed force, in the defense and protection of a vast empire, depend less on its numbers than on its mobility—on the facility with which it can be conveyed to the point at which it may at any time be wanted. For instance, our government has now some six to eight thousand regulars scattered over Nebraska, Kansas, New Mexico, Northern Texas, Utah, California, Oregon, and Washington. These six or eight thousand are not as efficient as two thousand would be, if it were in the power of the government instantly to transfer those two thousand, by a mere order, to the point at which they might at any time be wanted. A Pacific railroad would not, indeed, fully effect this; but it would go far toward it.

3. Suppose our little army, now largely concentrated in Utah, were urgently needed to repel some sudden danger, whether on the Pacific or the Atlantic coast: It would be a good three month's work to provide the needful animals, and remove that force to either sea board. But with a Pacific railroad, the whole might be in New York, Charleston, New Orleans, or San Francisco, within a fortnight after the order was dispatched by telegraph from the War department, at Washington. The value of this facility of movement can hardly be over-estimated.

4. At present, the regiments employed on the Pacific are almost or quite wholly raised and recruited in the Atlantic States. Their removal thence to their destination costs largely, heavily, in direct expense, and in that time which is money. Suppose a regiment to cost half a million per annum, and that six months are now consumed in sending it from Baltimore to Puget's Sound, while one month would suffice with a Pacific railroad. In addition to the saving on the present cost of its transportation, the saving in the time of that regiment would be two hundred thousand dollars directly, and practically much more; as a part of the cost of recruiting, drilling, etc., now lost in the tedious transportation, would be saved by the accelerated movement.

5. In case of war with any great maritime power, in the absence of a Pacific railroad, we should be compelled either to surrender the Pacific states to subjugation and spoliation, or maintain a double armament at enormous cost. Our army on this side of the Rocky

Mountains would be utterly ineffective as against an expedition launched against the Pacific coast, and *vice versa*. But, with a Pacific railroad, and the telegraph which would inevitably accompany it, it would be morally impossible that an expedition directed against either seaboard, should not be anticipated in its arrival by the concentration, to oppose its landing, of our soldiers, drawn from every part of the country. Our government, in aiding the construction of such road, would inevitably stipulate for its use—exclusive, if required—in times of public peril; and would thus be enabled to transfer fifty thousand men from either coast to the other in the course of twenty or thirty days.

6. We have already expended some scores of millions of dollars on fortifications, and are urgently required to expend as many more. Especially on the Pacific is their construction pressingly demanded. I do not decide how fast nor how far this demand may or should be responded to; but I do say that a Pacific railroad, whereby the riflemen of the mountains could be brought to the Pacific within three days, and those of the Missouri within ten, would afford more security to San Francisco than ever so many gigantic and costly fortifications.

But enough on this head.

The social, moral, and intellectual blessings of a Pacific railroad can hardly be glanced at within the limits of an article. Suffice it for the present that I merely suggest them.

1. Our mails are now carried to and from California by steamships, via Panama, in twenty to thirty days, starting once a fortnight. The average time of transit from writers throughout the Atlantic states to their correspondents on the Pacific exceeds thirty days. With a Pacific railroad, this would be reduced to ten; for the letters written in Illinois or Michigan would reach their destinations in the mining counties of California quicker than letters sent from New York or Philadelphia would reach San Francisco. With a daily mail by railroad from each of our Atlantic cities to and from California, it is hardly possible that the amount of both letters and printed matter transmitted, and consequently of postage, should not be speedily quadrupled.

2. The first need of California to-day is a large influx of intelligent, capable, virtuous women. With a railroad to the Pacific, avoiding the miseries and perils of six thousand miles of ocean transportation, and making the transit a pleasant and interesting overland journey of ten days, at a reduced cost, the migration of this class would be immensely accelerated and increased. With wages for all kinds of women's work at least thrice as high on the Pacific as in this quarter, and with larger opportunities for honorable and fit settlement in life, I cannot doubt that tens of thousands would annually cross the Plains, to the signal benefit of California and of the whole country, as well as the improvement of their own fortunes and the profit of the railroad.

3. Thousands now staying in California, expecting to "go home" so soon as they shall have somewhat improved their circumstances, would send or come for their families and settle on the Pacific for life, if a railroad were opened. Tens of thousands who have been to California and come back, unwilling either to live away from their families or to expose them to the present hardships of migration thither, would return with all they

have, prepared to spend their remaining days in the land of gold, if there were a Pacific railroad.

4. Education is the vital want of California, second to its need of true women. School-books, and all the material of education, are now scarce and dear there. Almost all books sell there twice as high as here, and many of the best are scarcely attainable at any rate. With the Pacific railroad, all this would be changed for the better. The proportion of school-houses to grogshops would rapidly increase. All the elements of moral and religious melioration would be multiplied. Tens of thousands of our best citizens would visit the Pacific coast, receiving novel ideas and impressions, to their own profit and that of the people thus visited. Civilization, intelligence, refinement, on both sides of the mountain—still more, in the Great Basin inclosed by them—would receive a new and immense impulse, and the Union would acquire a greater accession of strength, power, endurance, and true glory, than it would from the acquisition of the whole continent down to Cape Horn.

The only points of view in which a railroad from the Missouri to the Pacific remains to be considered are those of its practicability, cost, location, and the ways and means. Let us look at them:

I. As to practicability, there is no room for hesitation or doubt. The Massachusetts Western, the Erie, the Pennsylvania, and the Baltimore and Ohio, have each encountered difficulties as formidable as any to be overcome by a Pacific railroad this side of the Sierra Nevada. Were the railroad simply to follow the principal emigrant trail up the Platte and down the Snake and Columbia to Oregon, or south-westwardly from the South Pass to the foot of the Sierra, it would encounter no serious obstacle.

II. The dearth of timber on the plains is the chief difficulty to be overcome; and this, with the prevalence of deep snows in and about the South Pass, will probably send the road considerably north or south of that famous and facile pass. I presume the shortest, most feasible, and best wooded route for a railroad from the Mississippi to the Pacific is one from Minnesota to Puget's Sound, leaving the Rocky Mountains, save some low spurs, on the south, and encountering less formidable snows than those of the North Platte, South Pass, and Green River. Another pretty well timbered and direct route, with but a moderate elevation at the pass of the Rocky Mountains, strikes westward from Dubuque to the Yellow Stone, follows one of the sources of that stream into and through the Rocky Mountains, and thence down a similar stream to the Columbia, and so through Oregon to Astoria. By taking this route, the timber of the Rocky Mountains could be cheaply rafted or floated to every part of the track on either side at which timber is naturally deficient. The routes which turn the Rocky Mountains and the Sierra Nevada by the south are necessarily longer than those above indicated (the earth's circumference being greater toward the equator than near the pole), traverse in good part a parched and sterile desert, and must encounter serious obstacles in the dearth of water and in crossing the Rio Del Norte and Colorado. They would, however, rarely or never be formidably obstructed by snow.

In my judgment, however, the preferable, though not the easiest route for a Pacific road traverses the valleys of the Kansas and its Smoky Hill fork, crossing thence to the more

northerly sources of the Arkansas, and passing with one of them through the Rocky Mountains, not far from the South Park, thence winding down some tributary to the Colorado, thence up a western fork or valley and down the Timpanagos or some such stream into Utah, and through that territory on or near Capt. Simpson's new road to the valley of the Carson, Truckee, or whatever stream should be found to proffer the least difficult way across the Sierra Nevada, to San Francisco. A railroad on this route would at once command a large and lucrative traffic from the Kansas gold region, from Utah, and from the newly-discovered but rich and growing gold region of Carson Valley or western Utah—soon, I trust, to be the territory of Nevada. Thousands have recently been drawn to Carson Valley by the fame of these mines; and the fact being established that gold, silver, and other valuable metals are found in Carson Valley, it is at least strongly probable that they will be found elsewhere along the eastern base of the Sierra Nevada. A railroad on this route would have an immediate and large local traffic, both in passengers and goods, from California to Carson Valley, from Missouri and Kansas to the Rocky Mountain gold region, and from each to Utah. Its mails, too, would be heavier and far, far more beneficent, than if conveyed by any other route. I judge, therefore, that on this route the railroad is most likely to be built, unless future developments of mineral wealth north or south of it should change the whole aspect of affairs.

III. And now as to cost and the ways and means:

This road cannot be built cheaply; for provisions and all the necessities of life must rule high along its line, and most of the laborers will have to be carried thither. Yet it is but fair to consider that many of the heaviest items of expense on most other railroads—land and land damages, timber, stone, etc.—will here cost nothing but the labor of preparing them for this use. Then the rock-cutting will, in the average, be light, and the bridging still lighter. For much of the distance, five thousand dollars per mile will grade and bridge a double track in the very best manner. Doubtless, there are miles that would cost \$100,000; but these are comparatively few; while the Colorado is the only formidable stream to be crossed between the Missouri and the Sacramento. And, as the road would necessarily be commenced at each end and pushed toward the center, it would have a considerable traffic on the very first hundred miles that should be completed, and a large one on the first five hundred. Were it to be finished next April so far as Carson Valley from the west and "Pike's Peak" from the east, I firmly believe that those two sections would pay expenses and interest on cost forthwith. If so, what might not be hoped from the completed road?

Again; it is to be considered that, by building thus in sections, each portion, as finished, would be used to forward provisions, rails, timber, etc., for the next. If wheat be worth five dollars per bushel to-day at Denver, it by no means follows that it would cost half so much, with a railroad from the Missouri completed nearly or quite to that point.

I estimate that a railroad from the Missouri at Kansas City, Wyandot, Leavenworth, Atchison, or St. Joseph, to San Francisco, must be nearly or quite two thousand miles long, and that it would cost, with a double track and fully equipped, seventy-five thousand dollars per mile, or one hundred and fifty millions of dollars. A sanguine engineer would probably reduce this to fifty thousand dollars per mile, or one hundred millions of dollars; but, as most works cost more than they were expected to, it is as well

to begin with large figures, so as not to be disappointed. More than a third of this road would build itself—that is, so much of it as lies in California, or within the boundaries assigned herself by the new state of Kansas, would readily be built by private enterprise, if the connecting link were certain to be perfected in due season. It seems advisable, however, to have a single road, under one direction, from the Missouri to the Pacific, and thus make the certain profits of the extremities contribute toward the construction and support of the less promising center.

But, supposing the cost of a Pacific railroad to be one hundred and fifty millions of dollars, or even one hundred millions of dollars, how is so large an amount to be procured?

I answer—not wholly by individual subscription, or voluntarily associated enterprise. The amount is too vast; the enterprise too formidable; the returns too remote and uncertain. In the present depression of railroad property and interests, an attempt to raise such a sum for any such purpose, would be madness. One railroad to the Pacific would probably pay; but what assurance could an association of private citizens have, that, having devoted their means and energies to the construction of such a road, it would not be rivaled and destroyed by a similar work on some other route? No hundred millions can be obtained for such an undertaking without assurance of government aid.

But neither will it answer to commit the government unqualifiedly to the construction of such a work. Its cost, in the hands of Federal functionaries, would be incalculable; it would be an infinite source of jobbing and partisan corruption; it would never be finished; and its net revenues would amount to nothing. And then the question of location—the conflict of rival interests—would alone suffice to prevent the construction of the work by the federal government.

But let that government simply resolve that the Pacific road shall be built—let Congress enact that sealed proposals for its construction shall be invited, and that whichever responsible company or corporation shall offer adequate security for that construction, to be completed within ten years, on the lowest terms, shall have public aid, provided the amount required do not exceed fifty millions of dollars, and the work will be done, certainly for fifty millions' bonus, probably for much less. The government on its part should concede to the company a mile in width, according to the section lines, of the public lands on either side of the road as built, with the right to take timber, stone and earth from any public lands without charge; and should require of said company that it carry a daily through-mail each way at the price paid other roads for conveying mails on first-class routes; and should moreover stipulate for the conveyance at all times of troops, arms, munitions, provisions, etc., for the public service, at the lowest rates, with a right to the exclusive possession and use of the road whenever a national exigency shall seem to require it. The government should leave the choice of route entirely to the company, only stipulating that it shall connect the navigable waters of the Mississippi with those of the Pacific Ocean, and that it shall be constructed wholly through our own territory. Payment of the national bonus to be made, say one-twentieth so soon as one-tenth of the road shall have been finished and approved, and at this rate until one-third of the road shall have been built, when the remainder of one-fourth of the bonus shall be paid; when half the road shall have been built, the payment of bonus shall be increased to one-third; when the

work is three-fourths done, what remains of five-eighths of the bonus shall be paid; and when the work is done and accepted, all that remains unpaid of the bonus shall be handed over to those who will have so nobly earned it.

By adopting this plan, the rivalries of routes will be made to work for, instead of working against, the construction of the road. Strenuous efforts will be made by the friends of each to put themselves in position to bid low enough to secure the location; and the lowest rate at which the work can safely be undertaken will unquestionably be bid. The road will be the property of the company constructing it, subject only to the rights of use, stipulated and paid for by the government. And, even were it to cost the latter a bonus of fully fifty millions, I feel certain that every farthing, of that large sum will have been reimbursed to the treasury within five years after the completion of the work in the proceeds of land sales, in increased postages, and in duties on goods imported, sold, and consumed because of this railroad—not to speak of the annual saving of millions in the cost of transporting and supplying troops.

Men and brethren! let us resolve to have a railroad to the Pacific—to have it soon. It will add more to the strength and wealth of our country than would the acquisition of a dozen Cubas. It will prove a bond of union not easily broken, and a new spring to our national industry, prosperity and wealth. It will call new manufactures into existence, and increase the demand for the products of those already existing. It will open new vistas to national and to individual aspiration, and crush out filibuster is in by giving a new and wholesome direction to the public mind. My long, fatiguing journey was undertaken in the hope that I might do something toward the early construction of the Pacific Railroad; and I trust that it has not been made wholly in vain.